

The First Sunday of Advent

27 November 2016

Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

St. Michael's Episcopal Church, Norman, Oklahoma

“He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.”

Every Sunday we say these words.

Week after week, year after year, century after century, the Church confesses this as one of the essentials of the Christian hope. The Second Coming of Christ, the Parousia (there's your theological vocabulary word for the week), the ringing down of the curtain on the final scene of human history and the establishment of God's dominion on the earth.

When it will happen, we know not. And not for want of trying to figure it out, God knows.

Over the centuries, prognosticators of every sort have strained their brains and their hearers' credulity to find out WHEN WILL THIS BE? Various interpreters have created convoluted systems of reading the Bible, wreaking immeasurable violence upon the sacred texts themselves, in order to support the interpreter's foregone conclusion of one calendar date or another.

When I was in high school, a book in circulation in my hometown nearly brought us all to catastrophe. It was titled “Eighty-Eight Reasons Why The Rapture Will Occur in 1988.” The author had assembled his own interpretations of scripture, history, world politics, and assorted other cultural artifacts to propose that the fall of that year, 1988, would see “the Rapture” (which is a concept not found in the Bible, by the way), the evacuation of some portion of the population (the “true believers”) into heaven, and the rest of humanity and the entire created order abandoned by its Creator to suffer destruction and annihilation.

As a result of this book's teaching many people I knew, neighbors, school friends, were going about in absolute terror. People were choosing not to pay their mortgage, or their rent, or their car note. Others were giving away their house pets to “non-believers” and preparing to suddenly vanish in a twinkle of light.

The day appointed came, and went. And we were all still there.

And we are all still here.

Dozens of dozens, hundreds of hundreds of thousands of thousands of days have come and gone, and we are all still here.

Because as Jesus himself says in the gospel this morning, when his friends and colleagues are pestering him with just this question, “When will this happen?” he tells them “Y'all, even I don't know! So don't you go running around after a bunch of so-called prophets spouting pseudo-biblical nonsense, because they don't know either. Just be ready, period! Any day could be the day; every day is the day of my coming.”

The hymnwriter Eric Routley puts it well: “For all days are days of judgment, and the Lord is waiting still; drawing near a world that spurns him, offering peace from Calvary’s hill.” (“All who love and serve your city”, *Hymnal 1982*, #570/571)

The judgment that Christ offers when he comes, when ever, how ever he comes, is the judgment he bestows on his frightened disciples in the Upper Room on Easter Day Evening. He extends his hands to them—broken, bloodstained, wounded, glorified—and says, not just once, but twice: “Peace be with you.” He breathes on them, gives them his own breath and spirit, and says “Now go and do what I have done. Make peace. Heal the sick. Declare forgiveness. Enact reconciliation. Share the good news.”

When St. Paul writes to the Christians in Rome this morning, he has just reminded them of Jesus’ words about loving neighbor as self. “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. Besides all of this, you know what time it is...” Salvation is nearer than ever; the day of the Lord is dawning even as we speak. Put away all the distractions and hindrances; “...put on the armor of light.”

It’s an interesting metaphor: armor is heavy, clunky, defensive gear; “light” is both a noun and an adjective; it describes both luminescence and ease of motion.

Paul uses the same imagery elsewhere, in the first letter to the Thessalonians, when he says: “...let us... put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.” (5:8-10)

We’re not being asked to literally take up breastplates and helmets and go about in battle gear. We are being asked to clothe ourselves with the spiritual virtues and values of the kingdom of heaven: Faith, Hope, Love.

Love of Neighbor as self; love of God above all things.  
Faith, that in spite of all things, God is God in the midst of all things;  
Hope, trust, confidence, that God will do what God intends,  
perhaps using even our feeble selves as agents of the Divine purpose,  
and will amaze and astonish all who see it.

Advent is the getting-ready time.  
The cleaning of the clutter time.  
The time to deck the halls with greens and candles,  
the time to adorn our own hearts and lives to welcome the Guest who is on the way.\*  
Looking for the coming of the child in the manger in Bethlehem;  
looking for the coming of the King and Judge and Savior at the end of all things;  
looking for the coming of the one who comes to us every day;  
disguised as the stranger, the unknown one, the Other;  
we look back and remember; we look forward and anticipate;  
we awake, and open our eyes, and look around  
and discover Christ already present, in and among us, even now.

(Thanks to the carol texts, "People, Look East" and "We'll Dress The House" for this image.)